

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

Observations on China

From the Diary of Senator Arthur Vandenberg, 1948–1950

DECEMBER 11, 1948

Mr. Landon may be of the opinion that we “gulled” Republicans should have yelled our heads off about China and the Generalissimo during the past year or two, but in my opinion it would only have precipitated and underscored a discussion of Chiang’s weaknesses and would have nullified any remnant of his prestige. It is easy to sympathize with Chiang—to respect him. . . —as I always have and still do. But it is quite a different thing to plan resultful aid short of armed American intervention with American combat troops (which I have never favored and probably never shall).

I think our China policy was wrong (and always said so) in striving to force a Communist coalition on Chiang. . . . I think we should have taken realistic steps long ago to sustain the Nationalist Government—but certainly it is now evident that this “realism” also involved an indispensable house-cleaning in Chiang’s government. I envy Mr. Landon’s freedom to criticize what wasn’t done and his freedom of responsibility for deciding specifically what should have been done then and what ought to be done now. When practically all of our American—trained and American—equipped Chinese divisions surrender without firing a shot—where do we go from here? I am afraid I totally miss Mr. Landon’s point when he volunteers to take Republican responsibility for these Democratic decisions which never were, and are not now, any part of the bipartisan liaison. . . .

DECEMBER 14, 1948

We must deal with today’s conditions in China as they are and we must be realistic about it. Appropriations alone are not enough. They must implement a plan which offers at least some small degree of hope for success. . . . We have poured more than two billion dollars into China in the last few years. But pouring money is not enough—as we have learned to our sorrow. For example, a number of Chinese divisions—fully trained and equipped by America—have surrendered without firing a shot. And all of the American equipment is in the hands of these Chinese Communists. There can be plenty of argument as to why this happened. But the point is that it did happen—and no plan for the future is any good unless it can avoid such happenings again. This is simply one example out of many to demonstrate the extreme difficulty which the most ardent

friends of China (among whom I hope I am enrolled) confront in searching an answer to the current crisis.

[He wrote a month later:]

. . . the situation in China has disintegrated so rapidly that [we] . . . confront the grave question as to how any sort of American aid can be made effective and not be a waste of American resources. . . . It . . . seems to be apparent that this progressive disintegration has cost the National Government the support and sympathy of a large portion of all the Chinese people. Indeed, it is now probably that the Nationalist Government will fall before we could ever sustain it with a new program of aid. . . . If we made ourselves responsible for the Army of the Nationalist Government, we would be in the China war for keeps and the responsibility would be ours instead of hers. I am very sure that this would jeopardize our own national security beyond any possibility of justification. . . .

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 1949

Chiang and his Nationalist government may well be on their last legs. They probably will collapse in the near future. Our shipments to them, therefore, might well fall into the hands of the Northern Chinese Communists (as has been the case with American equipment furnished to eight American-trained Nationalist Divisions which surrendered without firing a shot). But there is something here vastly more important than what happens to \$60,000,000 worth of supplies. The American Government already is charged with a large share of responsibility for Chiang’s Government’s fate because of our previous policies and our failure to give it adequate military supplies. (This charge is only partially justified up-to-date). But if, at the very moment when Chiang’s Nationalists are desperately trying to negotiate some kind of a peace with the Communists, we suspend all military shipments to the Nationalists, we certainly shall make any hope of a negotiated peace impossible. We shall thus virtually notify the Communists that they can consider the war ended and themselves as victors. We virtually withdraw our recognition of the Nationalist Government. We seal China’s doom. Regardless of the justification of previous charges that our American policy has been largely responsible for China’s fate, if we take this step at this fatefully inept moment, we shall never be able to shake off the charge that we are the ones who gave poor China the final push into disaster. Millions of our

own people will be shocked; and we shall seriously lose prestige throughout the world. I decline any part of any such responsibility. I beg of you, at the very least, to postpone any such decision for a few more weeks until the China question is settled by China and in China and not by the American government in Washington. This blood must not be on our hands. My point is further emphasized by the fact that the title to almost all of this 60 millions in supplies has already passed to the Nationalist Government which is waiting for these export licenses. Therefore your order will be much more than a withholding of American supplies in American hands. It will be a ban on the Nationalist Government—and that will be “the last straw.” I make it plain that I have little or no hope for stopping the immediate Communist conquest. That is beside the point. I decline to be responsible for the last push which makes it possible. . . .

ABOUT AUGUST 15, 1949

. . . [Senator] Alex Smith. . . has a [strong concern] about doing something for China. . . . He doesn't know what—and neither do I, because China aid at the moment is like sticking your finger in the lake and looking for the hole. . . .

JANUARY 9, 1950

I . . . deeply dislike the present abrupt abandonment of the Nationalist Government (no matter what its weaknesses) without some sort of alternative program in Formosa (where the Formosans ought to have a right to say a little something about their own fate). I am opposed to recognition of the Communist regime in China

at this immediate moment—although realities may force an early abandonment of this position. . . . I may be wrong. But I cannot escape the feeling that the “Ward episode” [detention of U.S. Consul Angus War by Communists in Manchuria] and many others require some sort of assurances that the Communist government in China will respect our rights under international law. Perhaps the assurances (even though given) would prove as futile as the promises in the Roosevelt–Litvinov correspondence preceding our recognition of Soviet Russia. But it seems to me that at least as a matter of self-respect we must keep the record clear. This may prove to be impractical. But I want to explore it to a finality.

JANUARY 17, 1950

We must face things as they are and make the best of it. This inevitably requires us to face the total Far Eastern situation rather than China and Formosa by themselves. This means that our policy must concern itself not only with salvaging what we can in China and Formosa, but also in doing what will best keep another billion of Asiatics out of the Soviet order. I am convinced that we would seriously impair our status among the latter billion if we were to join ourselves in any military action. . . . I should. . . like to find a way to give the Formosans some degree of self-determination in respect to their own destiny; and I should like to see some means provided through which the United Nations can take collective action. But the whole thing is desperately complicated and we must proceed (at long last) with prudence as well as courage in this critical area. ■

Source

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